

STATEMENT OF BERNARD BERGAN  
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BEFORE THE  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*"Veterans in Tech: Innovative Careers for All Generations of Veterans"*

May 17, 2016

Thank you Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee of the House Veteran Affairs Committee.

My name is Bernard Bergan. I am an Army veteran and a graduate of the Microsoft Software and Systems Academy (MSSA). I am also an example of how tech companies, through public/private partnerships, can make a significant impact on veterans by helping them discover meaningful career paths as they re-enter civilian life.

It is an honor to appear before the Subcommittee this afternoon to share how Microsoft has made a life-altering investment in my career and the careers of hundreds of U.S. military veterans around the country. And how after three tours of duty in Afghanistan I was able to put these skills to use at Microsoft.

Two years ago, Microsoft testified before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to discuss how the private sector, and in particular the tech industry, could play a more hands-on role in helping our returning service members obtain the education, skills and industry-recognized certifications they need to successfully transition into civilian life with high paying careers in IT/STEM related occupations. The company had just launched the MSSA program and I was one of the first graduates. Since then I have found a home at Microsoft and the program is expanding into 12 locations around the country over the next year.

While that is certainly progress, I know from conversations with my fellow veterans that we still face enormous challenges in successfully transitioning into civilian life. Those conversations also tell me there is a real hunger among my former army colleagues for these type of skills

building programs. Those of us in the private sector must provide more service members and veterans access to opportunities that will change the trajectory of their lives, like Microsoft did with me.

And I am confident that there will be many, many other graduates like me given the company's recent expansion announcement, a clear sign that Microsoft is committed to training and employing veterans for years to come. Microsoft's goal is to train and find IT jobs for 5,000 service members over the next five years.

### **My Story**

I was born in the U.S. Virgin Islands. When I was twelve years old I moved with my parents and four brothers to Virginia where I attended high school and graduated from Old Dominion University with a criminal justice degree. I then decided to pursue an opportunity in the United States Army. I am proud to say I was on active duty from 2008 to 2014, serving all over the world, including an eleven-month deployment in Afghanistan's Helmand Province. My experience taught me the importance of teamwork, and deeply instilled the value of selfless service and a commitment to excellence.

In May 2013, after my final deployment, I returned to the United States to prepare for my transition from the Army. This was a time of uncertainty and anxiety. While there might have been opportunities, I could not see a clear path, which was frustrating.

Then I was introduced to the MSSA program by my commanding officer at JBLM, Colonel Charles Hodges. He displayed real leadership and took a chance on us; without his ongoing

support, I would not be sitting before you today. The intensive IT skills training, paired with a guarantee of a job interview with Microsoft made the program my most attractive option.

The Microsoft Software and Systems Academy provided me with 16 weeks of training on the technical roles I was interested in exploring. During those four months, I realized that Microsoft was fully committed to helping me build the type of skills that would make me a valuable employee. During my time in MSSA, I met members of their Microsoft Military community who offered mentorship and support every step of the way. When I completed the MSSA program, I interviewed with Microsoft and accepted a position as a Software Developer.

Working at Microsoft has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Each day allows me to be around passionate individuals who work to have a global impact as they innovate around solving problems. The teamwork, camaraderie, and expertise I enjoy at Microsoft is similar to my time in the Army, and makes me feel more at home than I ever could have imagined when I first began the process of transitioning out of the Army.

The teamwork and camaraderie are just two of the many qualities of private sector life that are similar to what I enjoyed in the military. Others include the ability to grow. Just like in the military, I have the opportunity to earn promotions. In my case, I am especially grateful that my hard work has enabled me to be promoted twice in the two years I have been at Microsoft.

In addition to Microsoft being a good transition for me, it's also been a good one for my family. My wife has been able to refocus on her career in dental hygiene and has accepted a position with Washington State's Department of Health. She is also heading back to school to pursue

her MBA. This would not have been possible had I not been able to make such a smooth transition into the civilian workforce and land my career at Microsoft.

Looking back, it is fair to say that it has not been particularly easy to transition out of the military. I was uncertain about how I would know if I was making the right career move. I wondered how I was going to provide for my family. I had no idea where we were going to live. With all of this running through my head as I tried to prepare myself for the next phase of my life, securing a high paying career in the IT industry was the farthest thing from my mind - until the MSSA program came along.

## **MSSA**

By way of background, MSSA is a joint effort of Microsoft and its educational partner, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU). The two have been hard at work collaborating with military installations such as Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), Camp Pendleton, Fort Hood, and Fort Campbell to implement the Microsoft Software and Systems Academy across the country. The company has also developed an ecosystem of private sector employers that have stepped up to hire MSSA graduates.

I am pleased to report the program has graduated more than 325 veterans from JBLM, Fort Hood and Camp Pendleton, of which 92% are presently working in high paying STEM related careers in the IT industry with an average starting salary of more than \$70,000. Microsoft has plans to bring the program to an additional eight communities over the next eighteen months, servicing 14 military installations across the country. Fort Benning will open next in early

August, followed by Marine Corps Base Quantico, Fort Bragg, Fort Bliss, and Marine Corps Base Lejeune in the months to come. Over one hundred employers, including some in this room, have joined with Microsoft to hire MSSA graduates into high paying tech careers. Their partnership is critical to the long-term success of this effort. I am proud to be a part of that success, because I have seen how the MSSA program changes lives for the better.

I have come to find out through my work at Microsoft and by talking with my fellow MSSA graduates, employers outside of the IT sector are also competing for this same talent. Great companies from a wide spectrum of industries like GE, Ford, JP Morgan, Deloitte, and Blue Cross have stepped up to hire significant numbers of veterans.

Given the enormity of the challenge, Microsoft understood they could not do this alone and that this initiative was not just about feeding their company talent pipeline. In fact, the skills that I have acquired were not Microsoft specific, but rather industry recognized credentials that provided me with job portability to work in a wide variety of rewarding IT occupations. More work is required to provide greater access to these skills training and job opportunities.

As I mentioned earlier in my testimony, over the next five years Microsoft is committed to graduating 1,000 transitioning veterans each year, and placing at least 90% of them into high-paying jobs in the IT industry. We recognize that some MSSA graduates will decide to pursue their degree with the credits earned in the program. I know this option is also a viable path to employment success and should be supported through policies in Washington, D.C.

Though our veteran unemployment rate has seen a significant drop, we are not yet out of the woods. With more than 200,000 veterans planning to transition out of the military every year over the next five years, there is a big opportunity for the IT industry to tap into a large talent pool of agile, dedicated, and technically sharp workers. These veterans continue to face unique challenges in transitioning to the civilian workforce, and deserve the highest level of support.

I think my experience in transitioning was quite similar to many others; simply put, the transition to civilian life can be overwhelming and brutally challenging. There are numerous obstacles to overcome - an entirely new culture, a new language, and a new environment. Any one of these can be hard to manage on their own; together, they are very difficult to overcome. While there are hundreds of veteran support programs already in existence, the key differentiator of the MSSA program is that it prepared me for the whole host of transition challenges that face a veteran. While the four hours of technical homework every evening gave me skills that let me interview for the Microsoft job, what makes this program stand out from all others is the soft-skills training. I learned to write a resume; conduct myself in an interview; dress appropriately in a business setting; and develop an elevator pitch. But the most important part of this process was connecting with a veteran mentor from Microsoft. He checked in with me on a weekly basis, and we chatted about what life would be like once I transitioned out of the military. He shared his personal stories about how he overcame challenges with the help of the military affairs community that exists at Microsoft.

## **SkillBridge**

As I am sure the Members of this Subcommittee know very well, the Department of Defense, through its SkillBridge program, permits transitioning veterans to begin a certification or vocational training program such as the Microsoft Software and Systems Academy. From my experience, it was a life changing opportunity.

This skills training can take place during a service member's last six months in service, affording the service member relevant training in a field he/she wants to pursue, and possibly securing employment prior to their end-of-active service (EAS). While this DOD program is beginning to gain momentum, there continues to be a preference for utilizing that transitioning service member until the very last day of service due to operational tempo and command requirements. This places an undue burden on the service member and restricts their opportunity to pursue career paths that can lead to high-paying jobs in industries I never believed possible. I urge the Members of this Subcommittee to work with the DOD and their military base commanders to broaden the acceptance of SkillBridge programs across a greater number of bases across the country. As a practical matter, there could also be a substantial cost savings for the military as more and more service members are able to secure meaningful civilian employment thereby reducing unemployment insurance costs for their respective branch of service. In these tight fiscal times, DOD could potentially save tens of millions of dollars annually by incorporating these successful programs onto every base in the country

moving forward, and I'd recommend this committee to encourage the Department in that direction.

### **National Cybersecurity Employment Forecast**

I'd also recommend this committee engage with technology companies encouraging them to train and hire veterans in new areas, like cybersecurity, where demand is high. It is no surprise to most in this room that the Bureau of Labor Statistics continues to project a significant shortage of critical IT workers over the next decade. One very important technical area, where skilled workers are in most demand, is cybersecurity. These workers are critical, not only to the IT industry, but also to the public sector where they help protect our nation's infrastructure (electrical grids, waterways, mass transit, etc.). Transitioning service members with cybersecurity skills and top security clearances are primed for these high-paying careers. For our part, over the next several months, Microsoft will add a Security Administration Learning Path to the MSSA program, so that those who are interested in a career in cybersecurity can gain the training they need.

### **Community-Based Model**

While much of my testimony has focused on veteran employment, it is also important to understand military spouses. Spouses make tremendous sacrifices, especially when their loved one is deployed, protecting our nation and its citizens all over the world.

For its part, Microsoft recognizes that more must be done to help spouses, and to that end, the company will be establishing a community-based model of our Microsoft Software and Systems

Academy (MSSA), that will offer evening courses, making them more available to working spouses who may want to make a career change.

These two community based MSSA models will launch within the next 12 months in San Diego and Jacksonville. While we are also eager to expand into Norfolk, another vibrant military community with a significant number of active, retired and veteran military population, the Navy's higher operational tempo and need to keep their sailors working through their last day of service is making the launch of a model there more difficult than anticipated. But with the Committee's support and encouragement, we are hopeful that individuals in the Navy will soon be afforded similar opportunities, and possibly have a great IT career awaiting them at the end of their military service.

## **Conclusion**

I am so proud of the work the Microsoft Military Affairs team is doing to empower veterans like me with training that leads to high-paying IT careers.

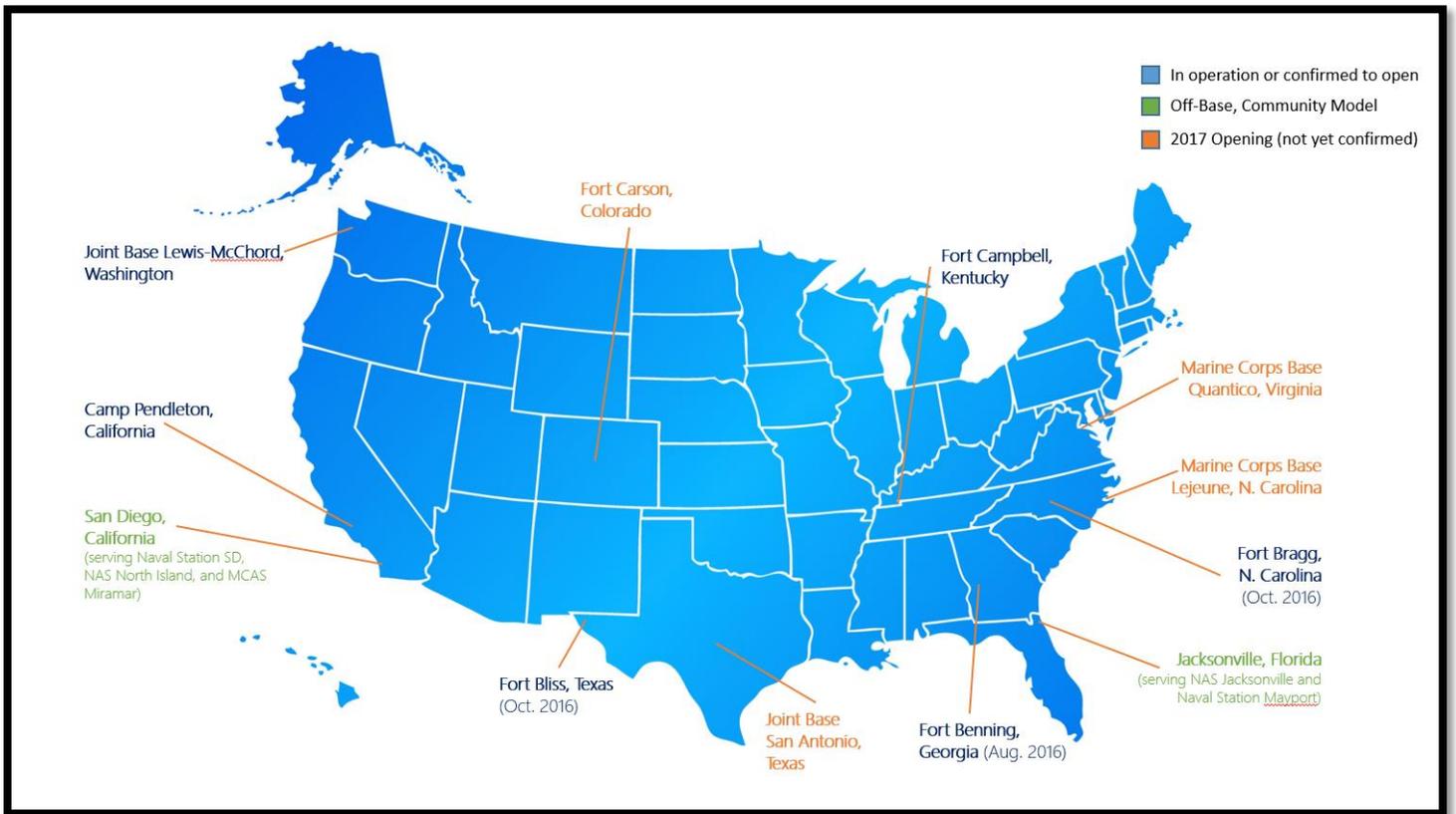
Our veterans are a national resource. As a nation, we invest in them heavily with the best training and most technically advanced equipment in the world. These are smart, agile, dependable, and motivated individuals that are ready to work. It is incumbent upon all of us to facilitate the challenging transition from the military to the civilian workforce.

Our veterans have made sacrifices. It is time for industry, government, and non-profit leaders to give back by investing in our veterans by increasing access to the types of in-demand IT

training that leads not just to a job, but to meaningful careers. The Microsoft Software and Systems Academy is a model that fulfills this mission. I am living proof.

Thank you for your ongoing support of our veterans and for allowing me to share my story and Microsoft's commitment.

## Appendix for Bernard Bergan's Testimony



All **4**

branches of the military

**90%**

Graduate from MSSA

**92%**

Employed (a few pursuing a degree)

Employed graduates on average earn more than

**\$70,000**

More than **150** companies  
hired MSSA grads